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THE MILITARY AND THE MEDIA: A QUESTION OF ETHICS

by

**Thomas S. Yarbrough
Lieutenant Colonel, USAF**

**A REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
IN
FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM
REQUIREMENT**

Advisor: Major A. M. Bourland

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ABSTRACT

TITLE: The Media and the Military: A Question of Ethics

AUTHOR: Thomas S. Yarbrough, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

The military and the media have had a rocky association since at least the American Civil War, but the relationship has taken a decidedly negative turn over the past 25 to 30 years. It is the author's assertion that the major factor in this deterioration was the abandoning of basic core ethical values by the government, the military, and the media, especially during the Vietnam War period. This paper defines ethics and ethical conduct for both groups and individuals. It then reviews the history of military/media relationships from the Civil War period through Desert Storm from an ethical point of view. The ethical failures of the government, the military, and the media are discussed, concentrating on the Vietnam War. Numerous examples are presented to support the base assumption. The paper concludes by offering some suggestions for improving the relationship.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lt Col Thomas S. Yarbrough is a native of Mason, TN. He entered the Air Force as a distinguished graduate of the ROTC program at Mississippi State University in 1974. Following undergraduate pilot training at Williams AFB, AZ, he flew the KC-135 air refueling tanker at K.I. Sawyer AFB, MI, and Barksdale AFB, LA.

Chosen by CINCSAC as one of only seven SAC officers for 1980 to participate in the Senior Commander's Education Program, he attended the Georgia Institute of Technology where he completed a Master of Science in Electrical Engineering degree in 1982. Lt Col Yarbrough next reported to Headquarters, Armament Division, Eglin AFB, FL, where he served as Chief, Electronics Division; Chief Standardization Division; and program manager of a classified acquisition program. He attended Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) in 1986-87.

Col Yarbrough returned to flying duties in the KC-135R at Altus AFB, OK, where he served as Chief, Flight Training Division and wing Executive Support Officer. On November 19, 1988, his crew set four world time-to-climb records for which they received the 1988 Kalberer Award and were nominated for the MacKay Trophy.

In November, 1990, Lt Col Yarbrough deployed to Al Dhafra Air Base, United Arab Emirates, where he served for the next five and a half months as staff instructor pilot and operations officer for the 1705th Air Refueling Squadron, Provisional, during Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM. In October, 1991, he assumed command of the 917th Air Refueling Squadron at Dyess AFB, TX, which he commanded until June, 1993.

Lt Col Yarbrough is a command pilot with over 3000 flying hours including 130 hours of combat support time. His decorations include the Bronze Star, the Meritorious Service Medal, the Air Medal, the Air Force Commendation Medal, and the Southwest Asia Service Medal.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Go in there and read this, then forget what you've read." Words spoken by Lt Gen Kane to reporter Elmer Brockhurst concerning a sensitive military operation in the World War II movie "Command Decision." A fictional account to be sure, but representative of a relationship between the military and the media that would seem very foreign to most of us today. But why? The history of conflict between the military and the media goes back over a century to at least the American Civil War. But the relationship seems to have taken a decidedly negative turn in the last 25 to 30 years. It is my contention that this deterioration occurred in large part when the military, the government, and the media--mainly during the Vietnam years--resorted to unethical conduct which destroyed the trust and basis for interaction that had existed before, however strained it may have been. It is my further contention that nothing short of a return to consistently ethical conduct will reverse this deterioration.

I will attempt to demonstrate this by first discussing just what I mean by ethics and ethical conduct followed by a review of the history of military/media relationships, concentrating on the Vietnam years. Next I will discuss why the military and media need to work together for the good of both--and the country. Having thus set the stage, I will discuss the ethical lapses that I believe are so critical to understanding the estrangement and effecting the rapprochement. Finally, I will draw some conclusions and offer some personal recommendations on how the military and media can work together more effectively in the future.

CHAPTER II

ETHICS DEFINED

Before going further, I think I should discuss just how I define ethics and ethical conduct for the purposes of this paper. If I am going to accuse people of unethical behavior, it only seems fair to define just what unethical behavior is. The Random House College Dictionary defines ethics as "a system of moral principles. . . . the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group, culture, etc. . . . moral principals, as of an individual." It further states that, "Morals refers to generally accepted customs of conduct and right living in a society, and to the individual's practice in relation to these."¹ So we can note that ethics refers to the system or group of principles that define what conduct will be considered as right or wrong in a given society or group. There are several questions worth asking in light of this definition.

First, just how does a group go about acquiring its ethical standards? As noted, ethics can be attributed to both groups and individuals. Of course, since groups are made up of individuals, individual ethics must necessarily form the basis for group ethics. And since one of the characteristics of a group's ethics is that they be recognized by the group, it follows that the members of the group must understand and be willing to accept the group's determination of which actions it recognizes as ethical. This is a key point. There are various methods by which a group comes to accept just what rules of behavior it will recognize as forming its ethical code. Many of the rules a group adopts are undoubtedly developed from within the group itself either by common agreement or as dictated by the group's leadership. Many military commanders go to great lengths to communicate rules of behavior that go beyond regulations in an effort to so-

lidify the ethics of their command. Sigma Delta Chi, the society of professional journalists, as its attempt to foster ethical conduct by the media, adopted a code of ethics for journalists in 1926 and has revised it several times since then.²

In other cases rules are imposed on a group from outside. Laws are probably the most obvious example. The restrictions on military officers participating in partisan politics are another. If the group in question is a subgroup of a larger entity, then the parent group will often establish rules that the subgroup must live by. The subgroup can often make these rules more restrictive, but usually not less. Many military regulations would fall into this category since they can be tightened if needed, but not normally loosened without permission. Whatever the process, a group must come to recognize the rules of behavior with respect to what is right and wrong that form the ethical standards it will live by.

Second, just how and when do the ethics of an individual or group change? Since the rules originate from various places as noted above, the changes must too. Seldom do the ethics of a group fail to change when the society the group is drawn from undergoes changes in its ethics. Witness the shift in what is now generally accepted behavior in movies, schools, dress, etc. as compared to just a few years ago. Even the once nearly universally held beliefs that it is wrong for women to serve as priests or participate in combat have fallen to the changes in our society.

Also note that since a group is not the sole originator of its ethical standards in many cases, it cannot unilaterally change those standards. This may prove to be another important point since it seems reasonable that the individual ethics of a group's members will often change faster than those of the group as a whole. When this happens, group members may no longer be willing to conform to the group's standards. The opposite situation occurs when the group changes its ethical standards, but individual members of the group do not accept the change. In either case, conflict arises, and one of two things must happen. Either the individual must agree to live by the ethics of the group, or the ethics of the group will change to match the changing

ethics of its individual members. When carried to the extreme, this can be a difficult process which leads to the next question.

Finally, are there some basic "core" ethics that should never change? If so, how are they determined? This is to me the crux of the discussion in this paper. Some of the rules will inevitably change over time, and some extreme proponents of situation ethics might assert that there are no absolutes. However, I suggest that the evidence strongly indicates that there must be some core values that are so basic and important that they do not change. Without them, a group or individual has no credibility or foundation on which to build relationships with others. And if there are fundamental core values, as I believe, then group leaders must give them strong support. Group members must know what the core values are and that breeches of those values will not be tolerated.

The specific values that serve as core values may differ from group to group as with other ethical standards. There are several values however that are so basic they should be almost universal. Honesty, loyalty, and fair treatment seem to be such values. There could easily be others. As we will see later, even these fundamental values have been abandoned at times and with tragic results.

Having gone through the preceding discussion, we can now define unethical behavior. The recognized rules of behavior constitute ethics, and violating those rules constitutes unethical behavior. The rules are established through various means and are not static. It is not always obvious just what the rules are at a given point in time, but there should be some basic core values, and violating them is always a recipe for disaster.

CHAPTER III

HISTORY

Pre-Vietnam

The development of the telegraph brought on the first serious clashes between the military and the media. During the Civil War, Confederate forces got much useful information from Northern newspapers. There was no effective national policy on censorship. Some commanders had good relations with the press, some did not, and each dealt with the press as he saw fit.³ General Sherman's disdain for the press is legendary, leading one correspondent to remark, "A cat in hell without claws is nothing [compared] to a reporter in General Sherman's army."⁴

During the Spanish-American War there was much criticism of the press for its reporting practices, but relations with the military were relatively good. Censorship was officially implemented in World War I, and tight controls were placed on correspondents. The media was used for propaganda purposes, and the military started its own newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*.⁵

By the time World War II started, radio was available, reducing the time required to get news to the public. Censorship was again implemented. The army worked very effectively in getting news to the reporters and allowing them to get it out. Many reporters complained about government controls, but the reporting was for the most part positive. After the war some in the press felt they had been too positive. Charles Lynch, a Canadian reporter, complained,

We were a propaganda arm of our governments. At the start, censors enforced that, but by the end we were our own censors. We were cheerleaders. I suppose there wasn't an alternative at this time. It was total war. But, for God's sake, let's not glorify our role. It wasn't good journalism. It wasn't journalism at all.⁶

In Korea, the relationship began to deteriorate. No censorship early on followed by "complete"

censorship later, negative stories on the conduct of the war, and conflict over the reporting of the U.N. peace talks all contributed to the tension. Even though these tensions were the precursor of problems to come, the relationship seemed to work. As Major Larry Watson states, "The legacy of the early [pre-Vietnam] wars was a nation, government, and military that came to expect the press to support them during war."⁷

Vietnam

It is widely accepted that the Vietnam War period saw the most drastic decline in the relationship between the military and the media which at first glance is a bit surprising given the relative freedom under which the press operated there. Initially, the media played much the same role it had previously. Kim Willenson, editor of *The Bad War*, points out, "Coming out of World War II and the Cold War, many journalists had felt themselves part of the establishment. They tended to believe official pronouncements, to report them at face value, and to help keep secrets whose disclosure might damage the country."⁸ As I mentioned, the controls on journalists were more lax than in previous wars. Loren Thompson notes, "The Vietnam War . . . became the first conflict the United States had been involved in since the nineteenth century where formal censorship of media coverage did not occur."⁹ Peter Braestrup in his foreword to *Hotel Warriors* notes,

Vietnam was a low-intensity conflict against a foe who, however tenacious and tactically adept, could not easily exploit (the few) inadvertent breaches of security. Moreover, except during the 1968 Tet offensive and a few other crises, the press put few burdens on U.S. military logistics or on unit commanders, seldom were more than 40 American journalists out in the field on a given day.¹⁰

And even though the press roamed free, there was very little breech of security throughout the conflict. The Twentieth Century Fund report noted only six violations of ground rules that resulted in journalists' credentials being revoked.¹¹ So what happened to sour the relationship?

The first problem was that both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were very sensi-

tive to negative publicity. That in itself is not surprising, or a problem. Dislike of negative publicity is normal. The problem arose when initial attempts to counter bad press turned into out-and-out deception. Both tried to keep the extent of U.S. personnel involvement from reaching the public. President Johnson desperately wanted to keep the war from derailing his Great Society programs. As a result, he took various steps attempting to minimize the war's impact on the public. Not calling up the reserves and painting a consistently rosy, though inaccurate, face on the conflict are examples. But, as Arthur Lubow writes, "the policy of letting the reporters see everything and then denying everything they saw ultimately backfired . . ." ¹² Walter Cronkite said, "My particular concern was that the administration did not tell us the truth about the nature or size of the commitment that was going to be required. And I think that's where the administration lost the support of the American people." ¹³

Another problem was that the military allowed itself to be drawn into the deception that the administrations were perpetrating. This is not to say that the only missteps the military made were in trumpeting the "party line," but I am convinced they were the most damaging. Reporters termed the daily government briefings in Saigon the "Five O'Clock Follies" since they were in sync with the optimistic reports being passed out in Washington, but were vastly different from what the reporters were seeing for themselves. In fact, General Westmoreland became directly involved in "selling" the war to the public to the extent of painting very optimistic pictures of the military situation--at times contradicted by his own intelligence--in an effort to help President Johnson counter negative press accounts. Predictably, the 1968 Tet offensive, even though it was a military victory for the U.S. and a solid defeat for the Viet Cong, was so out of character with the expectations that the administration, with the military's help, had built that the result was a blow to General Westmoreland's credibility from which he never recovered. ¹⁴ After Tet the media seemed to conclude that all information coming from official channels, both government and military, was probably not true and discounted it. This only intensified the frustrations of the military which found itself in an increasingly unpopular and seemingly never-ending war.

As news stories became more negative, military officers interpreted the reporters' unwillingness to believe them as personal attacks. The rift was rapidly widening as it never had before.

Finally, the media in Vietnam was not particularly adept at covering the war accurately. Many of the reporters in country were not trained in covering the military, and some were more interested in sensational stories than in accuracy.¹⁵ As a result, many of them did not have a good understanding of military matters which led to reports that were inaccurate and slanted. Also, the advances of technology, especially television, resulted in new priorities for the press. As Lieutenant Colonel Robert Pilnacek discusses, the media was increasingly trying to find stories that had action and dramatic effect to the exclusion of stories on the successes of land reforms or those designed to win the hearts and minds of the people.¹⁶

Post-Vietnam

The military drew many conclusions concerning the media from Vietnam. One, which caused major problems a few years later, was that military operations and the media do not mix. When U.S. forces attacked Grenada on October 25, 1983, reporters were excluded from the island for the first two days. The media, remembering Vietnam, immediately suspected a cover up. ABC's Sam Donaldson said, "I'm insistent that what you are doing here is covering up."¹⁷ Of course, the reason given was that logistics, reporters' safety, and security concerns made their going along unworkable. Officials, including Admiral Metcalf, the task force commander, and Secretary of State Schultz, cited this concern. Adding insult to injury, the media was not only excluded, but, in their eyes, lied to. The day prior to the invasion Bill Plante from CBS got wind of the invasion and tried to confirm it with Larry Speakes, White House press spokesman. Speakes, who had not been told about the operation, laughed at the notion and then checked with Robert Sims, NSC spokesman, who checked with John Poindexter, Deputy National Security Advisor. Speakes was told an invasion was preposterous and passed that on to Plante.¹⁸ Once again administration officials were going beyond normal security protection measures to

outright deception and lying. The media was finally given unrestricted access to Grenada on October 30, but the damage had been done.

In response to Grenada, the media press pool was instituted. It was used in Panama in 1989 and in Desert Storm--not very successfully either time for various reasons. Even so, the military was at least trying to find a way to work with the media, with limited success.

The Gulf War was easily the most extensively covered war in history. While prior to the D-Day landing in World War II there were only 395 accredited news people in England, 180 American, General Schwarzkopf had over 1,600 media representatives to deal with.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the military/media relationship in general was the best since before Vietnam. The Marines were especially effective in dealing with the media, and, as a result, garnered the lion's share of the coverage.²⁰ On the other hand, the Army seemed to still view the media with suspicion. Reporters covering the Army complained of their stories being unnecessarily delayed, limited access to transportation and communication equipment, and a general lack of support.²¹ The advent of satellite television hookups and the unique situation of one news agency, CNN, having a reporter filing reports from the enemy capital city brought the quantity and timeliness of reporting on this war to unprecedeted levels. This raised new problems which I will discuss later, but it is undoubtedly the wave of the future. Now let us turn to a discussion of why the military and media need to work together.

CHAPTER IV

WHY THE MEDIA AND MILITARY NEED TO WORK TOGETHER

Since there is a historic lack of trust between the media and the military, is there any reason to foster a relationship between the two? The answer is obviously yes, if for no other reason than that the press will insist on reporting on military operations. But the reasons go much deeper than that. As Peter Braestrup, Saigon bureau chief for *The Washington Post* during the Tet offensive, said, ". . . the military-media relationship, traditionally thorny, reflects the larger relationship between the government and the American people. And in wartime, for America to succeed, that relationship must be one of mutual trust and comprehension."²² History records many examples of such a relationship. William Lawrence, while a reporter for *The New York Times*, wrote a history of the Manhattan Project without disclosing so much as the project's name to his editor. In appreciation, he was allowed to go along on the second atomic bomb drop on Japan and wrote an exclusive account of the mission.²³ The generally positive interactions of the press and the Marines during Operation Desert Storm offer another, more recent example. In short, the relationship has worked; it can work; and it needs to work.

Another reason it needs to work is that one of the basic requirements of a free people is a free press--a reality the military wholeheartedly accepts in principle, but at times has trouble dealing with in practice. The following quotes from Thomas Jefferson illustrate his beliefs about the media and his struggles with it. The first dates from 1787 before he became president, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I would not hesitate to a moment to prefer the latter."²⁴ The second he wrote as he approached end of his second term as president, "I deplore the putrid

state into which our newspapers have passed, and the malignity, the vulgarity and the mendacious spirit of those who write them. . . . The press is an evil for which there is no remedy.. Our liberty depends upon freedom of the press and that cannot be limited without being lost." ²⁵ Alan Hooper would doubtless agree with Mr Jefferson; he notes the United Kingdom has existed with no major constitutional crisis for over 300 years and the United States will celebrate its 218th birthday next year. By contrast, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany--regimes that practiced strict press control--lasted for only 74 and 12 years respectively. ²⁶ The Constitution does not guarantee that the press will be accurate. It does not guarantee that it will be cooperative or supportive. It does not even guarantee that it will be fair or balanced. But it does guarantee that the press will be free. Freedom of the press is one of the most basic rights of a free people, a right we in the military are sworn to defend. We forget that at our peril.

Finally, we need each other. As I noted above, the media depends on the military to defend its freedom. The military, on the other hand, fares much better when the public knows what it is doing, even the occasional problems. The overwhelming public support for the Gulf War makes this clear. Nevertheless, I have no doubt many in the military would have a problem agreeing with Bernard E. Trainor, a retired U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant general, when he says, "What is frequently overlooked by the military is that the profession of journalism is as upright as that of the military, with pride in its integrity and strict norms of conduct for its members." ²⁷ In fact, many in the military might even question whether journalism is a profession at all. William Henry III notes, "journalism as a whole, unlike law or medicine, has no licensing procedure, no disciplinary panels, no agreed-upon code of behavior. Practices that are perfectly acceptable to some news-gathering institutions . . . are forbidden at others." ²⁸ However, for the purposes of this discussion, let us not debate the details of journalism as a profession. The sooner we in the profession of arms learn to accept that those who work as journalists, be they professionals or tradesmen, have a legitimate job to do, just as we, the better we will both be. Of course, the acceptance should go both ways. Arthur Lubow sums it up well:

Both the press and the military are burdened with the memory of Vietnam, but their memories should be longer. Vietnam was an anomaly. In modern war, reporters must be permitted at the front, and they must submit to sensible censorship. Mutual mistrust is part of the shared heritage of soldiers and journalists in time of war. So is mutual accommodation.²⁹

CHAPTER V

ETHICAL CONCERNs

Now we come to the heart of the matter, ethics. At the outset, I should differentiate between ethical war and ethical actions during war. Only the highest ranking military officers have any impact on our country's decision to enter into a war. Much has been written about what constitutes a just war, and I will leave that discussion to others. My concern here is on the actions of people given that the country is engaged in a conflict. I do not agree with George Lopez when he says, "Every modern war has had to represent, in order to be won, a temporary abdication of ethical and humane standards."³⁰ I believe that even though the pressures to abandon ethical behavior during war are often great, they need not and should not be given in to. Ethical standards can and should be maintained during war. The consequences of not doing so, as we will see, are great.

There are several factors that may explain what appears to be a general loss of ethical behavior during the Vietnam period. The U.S. was going through a difficult time where many people--especially young people of draft age--were beginning to question values which most people in society had previously accepted at face value. Free love, challenging authority, and tripping out on drugs were the new norms for a growing segment of society. Marlys Campbell notes, "This was an era of dissent throughout America, when the credibility of traditional American institutions was challenged by the nation's youth--an era of progressive movements, cultural revolution and intense social discord and change."³¹ In many cases, various groups' core values were under attack. As discussed earlier, when the values or ethics of a significant number of the people in a group change, there is a tendency for the group's ethics to change as well. This is es-

pecially true if the group does not work to clearly define and reinforce its ethical norms. Unfortunately, this loss of what I collectively call ethics was not confined to the young, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

The Administration (Government)

As I noted earlier, the majority of news stories during the world wars, and even Korea, were positive. The government had come to expect positive, supportive stories. And even with the technological and social changes that had occurred by the '60s, the early reporting from Vietnam was for the most part positive as well. However, reporters in country increasingly began to realize that the reports the government was releasing in Washington did not jibe with what they were seeing in the field.³² As noted earlier, both the Kennedy, and especially, the Johnson administrations were trying to keep the increasing level of U.S. involvement in Vietnam from the public. President Kennedy deliberately down played it by maintaining that the U.S. advisors were just that even though reporters had witnessed them participating in actual combat on several occasions.³³ President Johnson not only tried to keep things quiet, but began an aggressive publicity campaign of his own. Neither one, as Walter Cronkite noted in a speech in February, 1966, fostered public debate about the U.S. commitment by airing the facts.³⁴ Therefore, the nation went ever deeper into Vietnam with the public knowing little about what was happening and less about why. When the optimistic assertions of the government proved false, public support tumbled.

As the press coverage worsened, President Johnson coerced the military into his efforts to counter it. The Twentieth Century Fund report notes, "Especially in 1965-67, the Johnson administration insisted that the military commanders--and military spokesmen--join the civilian leadership in promoting and defending administration policy and countering 'negative' news stories."³⁵ In addition, Marlys Campbell notes, "The American Military Advisory Group had to substantiate the Washington version of the war, but attempts to mislead newsmen about the ex-

tent of American involvement did not fool the correspondents; it only hurt the credibility of the military.³⁶ It may seem a relatively small step to go from putting the best face on events to trying to mislead the public, but it is sufficiently far to cross the line from ethical to unethical behavior. Reporters don't like to have their questions left unanswered or answered only in part, but they understand why it is sometimes necessary. Lying, on the other hand, they do not understand, and they shouldn't since truthfulness is one of the basic core values that must be maintained. It is my belief that this deliberate and continuous abandoning of what should have been a primary ethical standard by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, more than any other factor, transformed an appropriately skeptical and adversarial press into the emotional, antagonistic, and consistently negative entity we so well remember. And why not? In the face of the actions of the government, one could even argue that the press was justified. On the other hand, the press was not without its own ethical problems.

The Media

As I mentioned earlier, the nation was going through a cultural revolution in the '60s, and the media was affected by it as well. Society was changing, and the positive relationship that had previously existed between the military and the media probably would not have continued no matter how the government and military behaved. Nevertheless excesses committed by the media also crossed the line into unethical behavior. Peter Braestrup, when asked why the media got the reporting of the Tet story so wrong, replied:

We wanted to call the score, so we did. We were reflecting the political reality back here, and confusing it with the military reality. Tet came after a great propaganda campaign. Johnson was hoist by his own petard, and newsmen love that. . . . for the first time in American history, a field commander, Westmoreland, had allowed himself to be snookered into becoming a political spokesman.³⁷

The Twentieth Century Fund report offers as a reason for some of the bad reporting: "Thanks to years of official optimism . . . that proved unfounded, newsmen in Saigon were inclined to dis-

count all optimistic assessments by official spokesmen, even as they dutifully reported them."³⁸ It was very difficult for many military officers to deal with newsmen who automatically assuming that they were lying. But if lying was a breech of ethics committed by government spokesmen, automatically assuming all military officers were lying was also a breech of a core ethical principle--fairness--committed by reporters. To say the least, the working relationship was breaking down.

The Military

Frustrations over the way the war in Vietnam was being conducted were wearing on the military which was having its own share of ethical problems. Backing up the administration's media campaign, the My Lai incident, and General Lavelle's bombing coverups are representative of serious breeches of core ethical standards that constituted unethical conduct and caused the military to lose credibility. In fact, some military officers began to vent their frustrations by leaking information to the press, itself a breech of ethics. James Schlesinger, Jr., former Secretary of Defense, after attending the Great Carabao Wallow and hearing the great anger expressed by the military officers in attendance concerning the media remarked,

The press was reflecting to a large extent some larger, substantive problems. They certainly were reflecting the deficiencies of our strategy, tactics, and operations in Vietnam. Because what most of these young lieutenant colonels of today don't know is that the people who were telling the press all of those things that were going on were officers like them out there in the field. . . They don't know that back then there were lots of people who disagreed with strategy and tactics, and many of them, perhaps a majority, were prepared to leak.³⁹

Many in the military are still quick to accuse the media of slanted and inaccurate reporting. We seldom admit that the media's problems were preceded by equally inappropriate actions on the part of the government spokesmen and military officers. It is also a fair question to ask why senior military leaders did not resign in protest over the way the war was being fought or the pressure the administrations were placing on the military to take part in their attempts to mislead

the American people. I suggest this failure not only indicated poor leadership, but a breach of ethics as well. We can only speculate as to what the impact would have been if General Westmoreland, the Joint Chiefs, or other senior military leaders had resigned in protest--as General Johnson, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, later lamented that he did not do. It is my conviction that an action of this magnitude by a senior leader may have bolstered the core ethical values that were under attack and thereby precluded some of the problems that occurred later.

If the military was reacting out of frustration, the media was reacting out of anger. Trust was gone, and suspicion abounded. The stage was set for a major confrontation. Military officers began to see the media not as just a nuisance, but as the enemy. And with no censorship, modern technology, and eroded cultural restraints, the media "went for the throat" of the government and military. Walter Cronkite noted that the networks were so big and so powerful that they could thumb their noses at the government,⁴⁰ and they did, especially after Tet. A government unwilling to level with the people, military officers unwilling to live by the ethical code they profess, and a media unwilling to stop or even acknowledge inaccurate and slanted reporting, obviously a low water mark for the United States. In my opinion, history offers no better example of what happens when truth and ethical behavior are discarded in favor of narrow aims or expediency. But does it have to continue?

CHAPTER VI

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The obvious answer is no. There is no excuse for unethical behavior on the part of the military, the government, or the media. The problems that arose during Vietnam are clear examples of the ~~fa~~ilacy of abandoning basic core ethical principles even during times of national stress and change. General Colin Powell seemed to agree when in 1988 as National Security Advisor he told the National Press Club, "I do not believe a public official under the oath and having sworn an oath to the Constitution and the people . . . has any part in any set of circumstances to lie, either to Congress or the press. I've never done it. I never will do it. . . . I do not believe it is the responsible course of action for public officials to lie, dissemble or in some way deceive."⁴¹ That conviction is as imperative as it is simple and an excellent example of a senior leader defining a core value that must be upheld.

Of course truthfulness with the press will not eliminate all problems, as General Dugan's firing shows, but it must be the bedrock of all actions. Consistently ethical behavior over the long term builds trust. And nothing short of a return to ethical behavior will rebuild lost trust. This will not eliminate the adversarial relationship between the military and the media, nor should it, but it will allow each to view the other with respect. Contrast the impact of Admiral Metcalf's handling of the media in Grenada with what happened in Vietnam. While the admiral's actions were strongly criticized as inappropriate, they were not unethical. The military shut the media out of the operation, but they didn't lie about it. There is a difference. Another example, Alan Hooper contrasts the accurate reporting of RAF casualties during the Battle of Britain with the body counts of Vietnam, "The RAF realized the vital importance of credibility and their in-

sistence on accuracy considerably enhanced their reputation with the press and with the public, both at home and abroad.⁴² I do not agree with Senator Hiram Johnson's assertion that, "The first casualty when war comes is the truth."⁴³ It may have been so, but it does not have to be.

Recommendations

I must admit, coming to the conviction that unethical conduct caused many of the military/media problems we are still dealing with today is easier than trying to develop solutions for those problems. Much has been written about how the military and media should work together in the future with many recommendations offered on all facets of the relationship. However, I will confine my recommendations to the area of ethics. The following suggestions are only the most basic. They do not address all the problems, but do at least address the core values that I suggest are of key importance.

First and most important, truthfulness must be practiced at all times. Without this, all else is meaningless; no relationship involving trust or even respect can be built apart from truthfulness. General Powell's words on its importance say it better than I could.

Second, the military and media must learn to have mutual respect for each other. The Twentieth Century Fund report noted,

our free press, when it accompanies the nation's soldiers into battle, performs a unique role. It serves as eyewitness; it forges a bond between the citizen and the soldier and, at its best, it strives to avoid manipulation either by officials or by critics of the government through accurate independent reporting. It also provides one of the checks and balances that sustains the confidence of the American people in their political system and armed forces.⁴⁴

Probably the main area that mutual respect should address is that both the military and the media need to make accommodations for the other. The military needs to recognize the legitimacy and value of press reporting on military actions and make reasonable facilities, transportation, and access to communications available. On the other hand, as John Fialka suggests, the press

should agree to some upper limit to the number of reporters actually accompanying troops into combat since asking the military to support an unlimited number of reporters is unrealistic.⁴⁵

Third, when military operations go wrong or setbacks occur, admit them up front. To do otherwise smacks of coverup, and the appearance of unethical conduct that that carries will be difficult if not impossible to remove. It is a fact that admitting a negative often turns it into a positive, but military people are far too prone to do the opposite.⁴⁶

Finally, leaders in both the press and the military should make a point of defining and constantly reinforcing the core principles that make up their own ethical standards. This may be the most important lesson to learn from the Vietnam experience. That was a time of great change and confusion for America, and no one in the military or media stood up to clearly define and defend the core ethical values that must not change.

Conclusion

So where do we go from here? This paper only barely scratches the surface of the military/media relationship dynamic. Loren Thompson suggests that while "The media have no constitutional right of access to military operations . . . the military has much to gain from working and improving relations with the press."⁴⁷ I agree. I have attempted to highlight the major role the breakdown in ethics--especially during the Vietnam period--played in the strained relationship we in the military have had with the media for over 25 years now. There are hopeful signs that the right lessons from Vietnam have been learned and relations are improving. A strong reliance on ethical behavior will keep us on the right, if not always comfortable, path. However I suspect we who practice the profession of arms will always view the media much as Alexis de Tocqueville did when he wrote over 150 years ago,

I admit that I do not feel toward freedom of the press that complete and instantaneous love which one accords to things by their nature supremely good. I love it more from considering the evils it prevents than on account of the good it does.⁴⁸

ENDNOTES

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3. Lloyd J. Matthews, ed., *Newsmen & National Defense*, (New York: Brassey's (U.S.), Inc., 1991), 4.
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. Phillip Knightly, *The First Casualty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), 333.
7. Major Larry Watson, "Should Members of the Military be Concerned about Television News Coverage of Military Operations?" (Master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1989), 43.
8. Kim Willenson, *The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Nal Books, 1987), 169.
9. Loren B. Thompson, ed., *Defense Beat* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 42.
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15. Colonel Michael W. Schoenfeld, "Military and the Media; Resolving the Conflict," (Research report, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, 1992), 6-7.

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21. Ibid.
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24. Peter R. Kann, "The Media, What's Right and Wrong." (Speech delivered at the Economic Club of Detroit, April 26, 1993, published in *Vital Speeches of the Day*, August 1, 1993, 618-621), 618.
25. Ibid.
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27. Matthews, 126.
28. William A. Henry III, "When Reporters Break the Rules." (*Time*, March 15, 1993, 54), 54.
29. Lubow, 25.
30. George A. Lopez, "The Gulf War: Not So Clean." (*The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September 1991, 30-35), 35.
31. Campbell, 19. See also Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) for a general history of the 1960s.
32. Ibid., 21-24.
33. Ibid., 18-19.
34. The Twentieth Century Fund, 62.

35. *Ibid.*, 63.
36. *Campbell*, 19.
37. *Willenson*, 190.
38. *The Twentieth Century Fund*, 64.
39. *Willenson*, 201.
40. *Watson*, 52-53.
41. "Gen. Powell Says NSC Again 'Moral Operation,'" *The Washington Post*, October 28, 1988, A3.
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46. Howard Kurtz, "Why the Press is Always Right." (*Columbia Journalism Review*, May-June 1993, 33-35), 35.
47. *Thompson*, 74-75.
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